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# Decorating Public and Private Spaces: Identity and Pride in a Refugee Camp

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## Abstract

Zaatari, the world's largest Syrian refugee camp, currently hosts around 80,000 Syrian refugees. Located in the desert, the camp has become the fifth biggest city in Jordan. Previous examinations of crisis-housing in refugee camps have assessed re-appropriation of shelters in order to improve functionality. In this paper, we show how interior adornment serves a purpose in refugee lives that goes beyond that of functionality. Our analysis of fieldwork conducted in Zaatari camp show how decorating provides an escape from the camp and compensates for loss of identity, home and leisure. Within contexts of austerity, decorating spaces is a valuable and vital aspect of living, coping and supporting people's sense of identity and pride. Through painting and decorating both public and private 'spaces', refugees transform them into 'places', creating a sense of home. We highlight how the capability of decorating, crafting and making is an enactment of freedom within contexts of political restrictions and resource limitations.

## Author Keywords

Syrian Refugees; Decorative artefacts; Place-making; Well-being; Human-Building Interaction.

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## Facts about the Zaatari Syrian Refugee Camp

**Population:** Since the camp was opened in April 2012, it has grown exponentially from 60 to 200 Thousand Syrian refugees in April 2013. Today around 80,000 still live there after nearly 7 years since the war broke out. Amongst Zaatari refugees 56% are less than 18 years old, of which 21,587 school-aged children are enrolled.

**Spaces:** Over 530 hectares, the camp includes 14 schools, 2 hospitals, 10 health care centres and 27 community centres (run by refugees and managed by the UNHCR and NGOs) providing psychosocial support & recreational activities. Plus estimated 3,000 informal shops and businesses.



Figure 1: An Aerial view of the Zaatari [Wikimedia Commons]

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;

## Introduction

Over 60 million people around the world are identified by the UN as displaced from their homes, of which 5.3 million are the Syrian refugees [12]. Covering 5.3 km<sup>2</sup>, divided into 12 districts inhabited by 80,000 people, Zaatari camp is now Jordan's fifth largest city as well as the fifth largest refugee camp in the world [12]. Prior to hosting Syrian refugees, Jordan has been hosting Palestinian refugees fleeing the 1948 and 1967 wars [7]. Consequently, we can understand the experience and the skepticism that the Jordanian government has in regards to dealing with temporary refugee camps that in reality turn into permanent settlements [1].

Unlike other cities, Zaatari camp is not a city of buildings or houses, but consists of a dense grid of some 24,000 modular pre-fabricated metal portacabins (locally known as caravans) re-appropriated for an entire array of living activities (see Figure 1). From domestic dwellings and shops to community centers, health-care centers, school classrooms and UN offices, caravans are the building blocks of the city. Caravans are surrounded by a ring road and connected with dust streets. Other infrastructural requirements such as water supply, sewers, electricity and telecommunications (both mobile coverage and Internet) are still limited. Such infrastructural limitations create numerous barriers to developing solutions and designing systems that can improve the quality of living in the camp and enhance people's lives. Although such limitations can be addressed over time, policy restrictions often create other artificial dilemmas.

The over-reactive (and over-protective) decision making process in such camps towards refugees often deem refugees as untrustworthy which in turn creates problems in itself [3]. For example, camp authorities control what kind of activities can be held for refugees, which research agendas get security access, and which materials/products get banned from entering the camp (e.g. from kitchen knives to cement and building bricks) for safety reasons and for fear of land possession. From refugees' perspective, building prohibition, materials restriction, and cash limitation are some of the major obstacles to their creativity, self-expression and control over designing their own long-term temporary homes, and therefore their community and their city.

We present findings from fieldwork conducted in Zaatari camp that explored the decoration of public and private spaces within the camp by refugee community members. The exterior and interior adornment we observed in the camp ties to the concept of Place-Making [4,6] and show how decorating spaces with objects shape people's lives and become the backdrop to their sense of self [5]. While the architecture of refugee camps has previously been investigated [8], we present our preliminary findings through the lens of Amryta Sen's Capabilities Approach [9,10] in which freedom is a pathway towards community development and wellbeing [9]. We show how decorating public and private spaces contribute to creating emotional escapes, compensating for loss and maintaining dignity, where the capability of decorating spaces is an enactment of freedom within contexts of political restrictions and austerity.



Figure 2: A model of traditional wheal resembling 'Norias of Hamah, Syria' and a fountain made from stone and mud.



Figure 3: A well decorating one of Zaatari's community centers.



Figure 4: A decorative cushion made from upcycling empty hessian bags of donated rice.

## Methods

From an HBI (Human-Building Interaction) perspective, we visited the Zaatari camp to explore and investigate the life of Syrian refugees in their prefab shelters. Through fieldwork across the districts of Zaatari camp, we were able to gather observational data from public spaces and private dwellings, paying attention to the details of customization and augmentation in both the exteriors and interiors. In addition to 1000 photos and reflective notes taken by our local researcher, 19 interviews were audio-recorded with refugees (9), volunteers (2), local artists (5) and different United Nations and NGO (Non-Governmental Organizations) staff members (3), to better understand the customization of space in Zaatari camp. We then used a process of Thematic Analysis [2] to draw out the main themes presented below.

## Findings

The main themes that emerged centered around (1) refugees upcycling existing materials as a means of facilitating the capability of making decorative objects, (2) decoration as an escape from the camp (3) decoration to compensate for loss, and (4) decoration to maintain dignity and pride.

### Decoration through Upcycling

Due to the limited availability of resources and the authorities' restriction of materials entering the camp, people have developed outstanding capabilities of recycling almost anything and everything they can find into other objects that are meaningful to them, even if the sole purpose is aesthetic. The fabric of old tents (that refugees lived in before caravans) is recycled into curtains. Wood and metal sheets pulled out of deteriorated caravans are recycled into garden fences,

plant pots and new walls/ partitions creating larger living spaces, in-house kitchens and toilets (to avoid using public ones). People make non-functional fountains, norias (Figure 2) and wells structures (Figure 3) from muddy sand, stones and rubble. They weave tapestries and rugs from old garments, and make decorative cushions from empty hessian bags of donated rice (Figure 4). Upcycling of materials was also used to create artefacts (with simple or no tools) that are rooted in their Syrian heritage.

### Decoration for Escape & Freedom

Adding decorative elements to their homes was observed as a way they escape the bitter reality of refugees' current situation and escape the devastating memories of war and destruction. A woman explained her bedroom tasseled curtain as: *"We had these curtains made at the tailor's. Can you tell we are here in a camp? No, we're in the city"*. A man who made his children a small decorated garden in front of his caravan (Figure 5) explained his 'making' process as: *"one enjoys spending his time with these things, to forget what happened to us and forget the grief"*. Another defined his decorative making as a way *"to get out of here, out of this atmosphere, out of Zaatari, to help us feel we're not in a camp"*. The desert nature of Zaatari (entirely different to southern Syria where most refugees originate) caused more pain and psychological ill-being over their displacement. One of the artists who paints caravans across the camp (Figure 6) told us: *"White colour started irritating our eyes, so we wanted to change into colours, paintings, nature sceneries, as we're now deprived from enjoying nature as we we're used to in Syria where we saw trees, rivers, and so many beautiful views. So we wanted to overcome that here with painting. Our role as artists is to draw the*



Figure 5: A decorated garden made by a refugee in front of his caravan for his kids, including a picnic table, a fake fountain, plant pots and olive trees.



Figure 6: Caravan exterior in Zaatari painted with natural scenery from Daraa, Syria.



Figure 7: Caravan interior wall, whose owner painted with a view of their village in Syria.

*smile on people's faces and paint what they wish to see."*

#### *Decoration for Loss*

Refugees explained that they add decorative elements to their homes (such as cushions and curtains with tassels, beads and drapes) to overcome the 'loss of their decent homes' that had been neatly styled. A young woman explained: *"People are trying to make decent homes and live here a bit like how they used to live in Syria. In Syria, we had better homes than these, prettier than these"*. Part of their grief was their sense of acute 'loss of leisure' where basic things they used to enjoy on daily basis are mere memories. For example, they told us stories about chatting with family by domestic fountains in summer and picnicking with friends in parks in the old days. Making decorative and interior objects helped their coping in this sense. In our visit we only observed one bed which a wife explained how it was hand-made by her husband to be comfortable for their intimate times.

Moreover, creating artefacts helped refugees retain their lost identity and heritage. In addition to natural scenes, artists throughout the camp make model sculptures and wall-sized paintings (on the exteriors of caravans) of Syrian heritage sites such as ancient buildings, forts and monuments from their rich history of Mesopotamian, Roman and Islamic eras. Even abstract graffiti would have Arabic artistic calligraphy alongside delivering subtle short messages of grief and hope simultaneously. *"We made them to remind ourselves and teach our children about our rich civilization and long history"*.

#### *Decoration for Dignity & Pride*

An important aspect is to understand what forms value in a certain culture. For Syrians, families, friends and neighbors are quite tied together, consistently visiting and enjoying food and company. Therefore, it is traditional to have a reception room, or a *salon*, as the most decorated space in every house. Many households who had received a new upgraded caravan did not throw their old caravan away, but kept it as to have extra space to receive guests, thus maintaining their sense of pride and respect. With limited resources, they would decorate it with paintings, calligraphy or inexpensive fabric to cover the unpleasant look of the metal interior wall (Figure 7). *"Some might think this is luxury, but we do this here, because this is how we lived in Syria"*. The extra neatness and tidiness we observed in every home visit was explained by several people as their 'sense of dignity'. A mother of two described: *"One has to feel comfortable, living at home in this place. Of course there are basic needs, but this is important as well. Elegance and neatness are important, the most important"*.

#### **Discussion**

Existing policy constraints imposed within the camp restrict refugee mobility within the camp and their agency in the utilization of the land in which they live on [1]. Within such restrictive policies, low cost design and upcycling allows for choices, giving people the capability to customize, to escape, make up for their loss and to maintain their dignity. As such the act of creating art and decorative artefacts help refugees cope with their hard living conditions. Previous examinations of re-appropriation and customization of shelters and architecture in refugee camps have focused on the functional aspects of shelters and how technologies can

be used to improve their safety and quality [8]. We take an alternative angle, where we explore customization of spaces in relation to wellbeing. Amartya Sen's capability approach [10] highlights how, in contexts of austerity and poverty, we need to look beyond the availability of material resources and goods as a means of achieving wellbeing. Instead we need to explore how quality of life and wellbeing is enhanced through the capability of individuals to partake in activities they perceive to be valuable [10]. In this sense, technology can help create affordances for how refugees share their spaces and resources in ways that suit their identity and needs, potentially empowering them with toolkits to craft their own dynamic spaces and artful designs. Such toolkits can empower them with 'crafting' and 'making' DIY techniques, tools and/or materials that can potentially enhance their living conditions and bring their shelters closer to what they can feel as home. Such enabling strategies can be –in some cases- of more benefit to refugees than direct funds. Our preliminary findings show how the capability of decorating private and public spaces creates an escape of the realities of living in a refugee camp thus improving psychological wellbeing. Similarly, the creation of decorative artefacts as means of maintaining lost heritage, identity and dignity provide refugees with the capability of living in a closer manner to the life they had.

In this sense, we should explore ways in which we can enable them to embed visual and audio memories they had into their current crafted artefacts. For example, in another context, through low cost DIY capacitive touch sensing embedded in fabric, the 'Partnership Quilt' [11] was created as a living archive of vulnerable voices in the shape of an interactive hand-stitched piece of

craftwork. This could be extended further using technology that does not require demanding power, devices or infrastructural deployment. For instance, solar decorative lights can harness the Middle-Eastern bright sun and shape it into delightful twinkling threads at night. Another opportunity is the use of smart paints, such as thermochromics and photochromics in their caravan exterior painting, changing them from summer to winter (responding to temperature), and from day to night (responding to light/darkness). This would allow sensing and actuation to take place with no electronics or computation at all, and could be applied by the refugees themselves, exploring the dynamic effects of such decoration. Further research might then investigate the influence of such morphing scenery on people's psychological wellbeing.

### Conclusion

We show how the capabilities of creating urban art and decorative artefacts within such refugee contexts is a means of improving wellbeing. Consequently, there is potential for the HCI community to support 'enabling strategies' to expand this capability agenda through future research in areas such as DIY architecture, crafting and making, traditional aesthetics, designing for domestic interaction and non-tokenistic participatory design of public spaces.

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